

“HONEST DOUBT”

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.
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Sermon Text: John 20:19-31

In our cynical age, we want confirmed facts and lots of them. I love this story. I told Emmie, who is not here for worship today, that I hoped she'd be here for this. It was about a brand new secretary, who was briefed by her boss. He said to her, "These accounts in particular are especially important, therefore, I want you to add each column of figures at least three times before you give me the results. Later the secretary laid the piece of paper on her boss' desk, and said, "I've added this column of figures ten times." The boss broke in, intending to compliment her for her thoroughness, until she continued and said, "and here are the ten different answers." We're a cynical bunch. We are. Our media, our politicians, and if the truth be told, even our friends and family have taught us to be cynical. We've been fooled one time too often.

A good old country boy from back in the hills decided one day to go to town. He'd heard all about the con men and the tricksters, but he decided to go see the sights anyway, so he packed up, and he went to the first circus he'd ever been to. He stood before the camel's cage, gaping at that strange beast within. He wondered in silence as he examined every detail of the camel's crooked legs, his cloven hooves, his sleepy eyes, his humped back. He continued to gaze at it for a long time, and finally he turned away with an air of disgust, and he muttered, "They can't fool me. There ain't no such animal."

Some people are so cynical, so afraid to be made a fool of even one more time that they refuse to believe even their own eyes. You may have forgotten or you may never have noticed one of what I consider one of the most puzzling verses in the entire Bible. It is one of those verses that tends to prove the Bible as true rather than made up myth where everything fits as manufactured fable. Humanity. True, ugly human tendencies show through far too often for the work of the Scripture to be a work of fiction. Were it to be a work of fiction, the story would paint the heroes much more heroically, instead find this verse after the Resurrection. After the disciples had seen Jesus arrested, and crucified, and dead and buried and alive again, alive and standing before them alive, and eating breakfast at one point, alive and showing the wounds of his side and his hand, after seeing all of this with their own eyes, there is a verse in Matthew that says, Chapter 28, verse 17 of Matthew says, "And when they saw him they worshipped him, but some doubted." They worshiped him, but some doubted. Jesus never said one doubt will cast you out, but he did say, "Truly I say to you whoever says to this mountain, be taken up and cast into the sea, and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him." He did say that the gifts of faith and the power of faith would be increased when you overcome your doubts, but doubt and proofs and fear and trembling seem to be part of the process of growing in faith, even for the disciples. People who say they have never doubted their faith in God are like people who have been married for decades, and tell me they've never had a disagreement. They either have very bad memories or they don't live in the same house. When someone's will struggles

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with another person’s will, there is friction and there is conflict, and it arises as naturally as a law of emotional physics.

Thomas is misremembered as “Doubting Thomas.” Yes, he had lots of doubts and he had questions, and he wasn’t afraid to share them, but if you really look at the other disciples, you see that they also had their doubts. They also had their questions. Thomas gave what sounds like honest doubts. When cynical men and women are asked to believe and give their whole hearts to God who whispers, to God who urges, to God who acts in ways, sometimes through a glass darkly, we can’t understand and beyond our direct inspection, we withhold some part of ourselves. We don’t want to be made fools of again. We don’t want to lose ourselves. It’s a funny thing. That’s exactly what Jesus said we must do, lose ourselves. Lose our lives by trusting God completely just as Abraham radically trusted God with Isaac, just as Moses radically trusted God and headed out into the desert, just as the disciples radically trusted God and dropped their nets, trusting Jesus as they followed. They lost their safety net. By taking the narrow path of trusting God, they lost their turn around room. They gave themselves up to faith and trust in God completely. We can start out a faith with the occasional doubt, but God has a way of making us decide. Trust me or trust your own resources, your own abilities and your own cleverness, now in this instant. God has a way of giving us instances where we must decide in this instant which are we going to trust. There are dividing lines in our lives where we cannot follow both our will and God’s will. There are times and situations where the world would think us foolish to follow God and sensible to abandon our faith and follow self-interest. The world would think so, but there are moments where we must choose between God and the world, between God and ourselves.

Sometimes doubt is not honest. I don’t believe doubt is honest at all. There are occasions when doubt is merely one more way of keeping all your options open and believing in self-preservation above all. As James says in the first chapter, verse 6, “For he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.” When we are looking out for ourselves alone, we let the wind blow us this way or that way, and we go with the flow, whatever is easiest, never taking a stand, never aiming for a particular destination. How very contrary was Jesus’ life. From the beginning, Scripture says His face was set on Jerusalem, set on the cross. Even though he knew that when he got there he would die, his face was set. Even though he prayed, “God, if there is any other way,” his face was set, but we in our self-interest do or don’t do whatever wave is the gentlest, whatever doubt allows us an out when God calls us to make a hard choice. Doubts, I believe, are ultimately not about evidence. Doubts can be, for many, mere tools to keep us from being made a fool of again. We’ve been made fools by trusting before, and we do not want to be made fools of again, not even by God, and so when it comes time to

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either trust God and follow or doubt, we use doubt sometimes as a tool. Maybe Thomas had had enough. It could be that Thomas was just not going to follow one step further and risk his life and livelihood unless God gave him some proof. Thomas would not trust until he saw with his own eyes the nail holes and the wounded side. I wonder if Thomas thought that that would be the end of it. I wonder if Thomas thought, “Well, that sounds reasonable, I just want to see if it’s true before I follow.” When he didn’t see, maybe he projected, I won’t have to follow and I don’t have to risk my life and I won’t have to suffer the ridicule of my old friends. I can save face if I don’t see what they say they saw. I just want proof, and I’ll publicly ask for it, and maybe he never expected to get it. Thomas, the cynic. Thomas, the thoroughly modern man. Thomas, the perfect stand in for modern men and women. You know, I’d love to believe he said, “Sounds good. I just haven’t seen the evidence yet.” Then God took Thomas’ excuses away. Then God gave Thomas what he asked for. Then God put it back into Thomas’s lap, and said, “Okay, here is your proof. Now choose. Now decide. Now believe or reject. It’s up to you. You’ve got your proof.” Cynical Thomas, his plan to reasonably walk away, to cynically save face, and safely keep his life to himself was washed down the drain.

Thomas gave the most beautiful and succinct confession of faith in the Gospels. He said simply, “My Lord and my God. My Lord, I recognize Your authority over me. I will follow You. I will trust You. My God, I now know who You are. Not just one more teacher among many. I now know who You are. God in flesh. You have shown us the Father. You and the Father are one. My Lord, I will follow and trust You. My God, Creator, and Savior, it is You.” And in that instant, his doubts disappeared. God made him make a choice and throw caution to the wind and throw the safety net away. Now his face was set upon God in Christ.

As John Updike puts it, he says, “If there is no God, then the universe is a freak show, and I do not experience it as a freak show. Though I have had neither the maleficent nor the beatific vision, I have heard whispers from the wings of the stage.” God, if not a direct appearance in front of us, has whispered to our hearts and souls, has spoken to us, and given us light and direction. Some day, some place, God will put us in a situation where our convenient doubts will not save us from full faith. Though they sound reasonable, doubts cannot keep us from seeing what we see. There is more to life than schools and cars and houses and kids and old age and death. Life means something, and life needs direction, and we feel God’s urging, sometimes through a glass darkly, but we feel, and God keeps disappointing us in what we thought would make us happy. God keeps taking away our distractions and excuses. God stays after us, always after us, seeking our total trust, our total faith, seeking our confession as God reveals Himself until we can say, “My Lord and my God.”

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Doubt is not the same as unbelief. Unbelief would be Thomas seeing and still saying, “I choose me.” Unbelief is closed to faith. Doubt is open to believing. When forced in a corner, when a choice is required, you can choose unbelief, or you can follow, and say, “My Lord and my God, I know who You are. I trust You. Even if I lose my safety net, even if I lose my old life, even if I am afraid to be made a fool of, even if I’m afraid to follow, I can’t avoid it anymore. I’ve been tossed randomly from one wave to another long enough. I’ve made myself a fool for me long enough. Time to choose a direction. Time to follow God, who won’t leave me alone. Time to follow God, who keeps whispering, “This way,” to my soul. Time to be a fool for Christ, if I am to be a fool. Time to follow my Lord and my God.” We still see, and we always will this side of the grave, through a glass darkly. It has been said that a Christian is one who is on the way, though not necessarily very far along, who has at least some dim and half-baked idea of whom to thank for it.

As I close, I had this thought. I hope that it makes some sense. When a stomach growls, it’s calling for food, and so you feed it, unless you’re on a diet. Doubt’s questions are the growls of the soul, for spiritual food and for nourishment, and they can stimulate us to seek food and to seek answers, you see, to seek to resolve these doubts. When we do that, the chances are we’re going to grow. A doubt can be useful when you follow it to the end. Thomas asked for proof and he got it. Then he chose faith and trust. So work out your faith, with fear and trembling if need be. Pray to the God you doubt about your doubts. Pray for assurance. Pray for proof and for courage to believe, and when it comes, follow. Follow. Amen.